

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 7A

BALTIMORE SUN
25 June 1985

Opinion • Commentary

An End to Covert Action

Washington.

THE United States government should get out of the covert action business.

Covert action is one of the most controversial jobs of the Central Intelligence Agency and is defined (in President Reagan's executive order governing U.S. intelligence) as "activities conducted in support of na-

By Allan E. Goodman

tional foreign policy objectives abroad which are planned and executed so that the role of the United States government is not apparent . . . Such activities traditionally have involved military operations with and training of insurgent groups as well as political propaganda and economic support to influence events and leaders abroad.

Much of U.S.-sponsored covert action continues in this tradition and has taken the form of such things as the mining of Nicaraguan harbors, providing economic and paramilitary help to the *Contras* and aid for the Muslim rebels fighting Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Other covert actions that have recently come to light include the training of counter-terrorist units of the Lebanese intelligence service (who may have run amok and used their newly-gained knowledge to carry out local vendettas) and the use of money to influence elections in El Salvador.

There are three reasons why Congress, which holds the purse strings for all of these operations, should outlaw covert action.

□ First, it is virtually impossible to keep covert action a secret. Washington's legion of investigative

reporters now have the ability to ferret out the details of even the most closely held covert operation and expose it. The reporters are considerably aided, of course, by the pervasive practice of leaking information about even the most sensitive and potentially embarrassing operations to express personal or bureaucratic dissent. This was the process, for example, through which most of the U.S. involvement with the *Contras* entered the public domain. The means suggested to prevent such disclosures — ranging from a repressive official secrets act to lie detector tests for all U.S. government employees with security clearances — are incompatible with democracy and especially the freedom of the press. Even if they were adopted, they probably would not work. Therefore, U.S. intelligence officials should face up to the reality that they have today virtually no capability to guarantee that covert operations can be kept secret.

□ Second, the record with respect to successes and failures of covert action has increasingly netted out on the deficit side. Successes such as the overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and the restoration of the shah in 1953, and the overthrow of the Communist-style government in Guatemala in 1954 appear to be increasingly rare. Indeed, as Admiral Stansfield Turner, who was director of Central Intelligence from 1977-1981, notes in his new book ("Secrecy and Democracy: The CIA in Transition"): "The majority of the espionage professionals, from what I could see, believed that covert action had brought more harm and criticism to the CIA than useful return, and that it has seriously detracted from the agency's primary role of collecting and evaluating intelligence." This opinion is even more strongly held by CIA professionals today.

□ Third, as the present executive order makes clear, covert action is a U.S. government policy option. By stating this fact, and by requiring the president personally to approve all covert actions, the U.S. government cannot plausibly deny the involvement of the head of state in such dirty tricks. This demeans the office of the president and allows

any beleaguered government or politician, especially in the Third World, to claim that efforts to oppose it by covert means are part of U.S. policy. Thus, the present set-up puts the U.S. government in the position of allowing the use of covert action to hide the hand of the government but not before the president himself has approved it. Therefore, real or imagined covert actions today can even more plausibly be cited by their targets as evidence of U.S. policy aimed against them.

Whenever the issue of abolishing covert action is raised in Congress or the executive, it is countered by the argument that the United States needs to preserve the option, especially if we ever become involved in another war. I accept that argument and can readily see the utility of the option in wartime. But the resort to covert action should be curbed in peacetime. I favor allowing it only when the president declares and Congress finds the nation to be at war.

Mr. Goodman is associate dean at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service. He formerly served as special assistant to the director of the foreign assessment center and as presidential briefing coordinator for the director of central intelligence.